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Free Trade for Central America

Six countries, the homelands of nearly a half-million New Yorkers, are seeking the benefit of free trade with their large, powerful and wealthy neighbor to the north. The United States government should give it to them.

The Central America Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA, would eliminate tariffs on many types of manufactured and agricultural goods transported between the U.S. and Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Such a duty-free zone would have a minimal economic effect on the U.S. but would be a major boost to its smaller trading partners.

Relieved of trade barriers, those countries could export more for consumption by American companies and consumers, creating jobs and lifting the standard of living for people desperate for work. Rather than having to leave their families and travel thousands of miles to find employment, they could earn a living wage at home.

More job opportunity means less poverty; less poverty means the beginnings of a stable middle class, which means a more stable society. Which means, especially for Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, less chance of backsliding into violence.

"Today, a part of the world that was once characterized by unrest and dictatorship now sees its future in free elections and free trade, and we must not take these gains for granted," President Bush said yesterday at the swearing-in ceremony for U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman. "These are small nations, but they are making big and brave commitments, and America needs to continue to support them as they walk down the road of openness and accountability."

While CAFTA is a sweet deal, there is strong opposition, primarily from the U.S. sugar business. The nation's sugar farmers, fewer than 6,000 of them, are the most protected industry in the country, and one of the most heavily subsidized. Americans pay more for sugar than anyone else: 23 cents per pound here, versus 9 cents on the world market. Just think what that does to the price of breakfast cereal and candy bars.

Not that Central American sugar imports would sink the business in the U.S.; the influx of sugar would equal about 1 teaspoon per week per consumer, while Americans eat about 70 spoonfuls. Still, the sugar biz likes things the way they are, and the industry gives an average of $1 million a year to federal candidates. Now, it is teaming up with organized labor to keep CAFTA from happening.

Last week, presidents of the six countries came to Washington to press for the agreement. The fledgling democracies in our backyard deserve a vote of confidence. Congress should not let them down.